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Nuchu and Kwarip

Images of the past in Central and South America

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My aim here is to address some issues concerning the relationship that Kuna people from Panama entertain with their past. Specifically, I will look at how this relationship informs the carving of wooden sculptures called *nuchukana* or *ukkurwalakana* which are central in Kuna healing rituals. Kuna people entertain a particular relation with their own past and with the people and entities that populate it; this relation unfolds when we look closely at contemporary daily practices, such as woodcarving. I will argue that figures of ancestors and primordial beings are conflated in Kuna practices and discourses involving their wooden figures and in the perception of the forest as their ancestral land. This poses an interesting problem: although Kuna wooden figures are associated with death and the primordial past, they are not, strictly speaking, representations of ancestors. How do Kuna people think about their forefathers? What ideas inform present day ritual practices in a Kuna lived world?

In order to address these questions I will point at

remarkable similarities between Kuna woodcarving and mortuary rituals carried out by the people from the Upper Xingu in Central Brasil. I will focus on common traits, as well as on differences, between Kuna and Xinguano ritual usages of wooden logs, and will highlight shared motifs in their mythologies and ritual life. Eventually, I will suggest that a similar logic underlies Kuna and Xinguano woodcarving, pointing at the relationship between the living and different forms of otherness, such as the dead, ancestors, or primordial beings.

Although I restrict my focus to the comparison between these two ethnographic areas, further ethnographic evidence suggests that the same comparison can be extended to other Amerindian societies. Little attention has been paid to three-dimensional, sculptural forms in Lowland Central and South America. Ethnographic studies of Amerindian sculptural forms are very limited mainly because of the difficulty in finding what we normally define as sculpture from a Western point of view, namely the representation of the human body. Nonetheless, ethnographic examples illustrate the use of sculptural forms in healing and mortuary rituals across a variety of groups in Central and South America suggesting a link between sculptural representations of the person and death (Fejos 1943; Nimuendajú 1952; Nordenskiöld 1929; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1960; Yépez 1982). I shall address here one aspect of this issue, which regards Kuna ideas of ancestral pasts and the ways these pasts can be instantiated in wooden sculptural forms.

The majority of Kuna people live on more than thirty small islands, scattered throughout the Archipelago of San Blas, off the Atlantic coast of Panama, also known as Kuna Yala (Kuna land). A few communities are situated in the Darién forest and on the Urabá gulf of Colombia. Almost half of the entire Kuna population (around 60,000) lives, more or less permanently, in Panama City, and other smaller towns such as Colón. The ancestors of Kuna people came in contact with Spanish invaders early in the sixteenth century (Lothrop 1948; Howe 1998) and by the mid seventeenth century they were living in the Darién forest, interacting with colonists and missionaries with alternating bellicose and cooperative attitudes (Salcedo Requejo 1908[1640]). What we know about Kuna ritual practices and cosmology from the early chronicles is scant, with the notable exception of the description of shamanic rituals given by the English surgeon and explorer Lionel Wafer (1888[1699]).

Kuna wooden figures are first mentioned by ethnographers and missionaries in the early twentieth century (Nordenskiöld 1929; 1938; Santa Teresa 1924). We know little about the origin of their carving. However, I shall argue that it is not through looking at archival sources that we are likely to find an answer to our initial questions, but rather by focusing on contemporary Kuna daily practices and discourses. By comparing Kuna practices with those of other Lowland Central and South American societies we can shed some light on their understanding of the relationship between past and present, the living and the dead.

Nuchu

Kuna people carve different types of wooden figures, almost all with anthropomorphic features. Small figures, maximally 10 cm long, are used by men as amulets to protect them from evil spirits when they walk alone in the mainland forest. They are also tied up at one extremity of hammocks where small babies sleep, to protect them against predatory spirits, and are put in water drunk by pregnant women, to help them have a smooth delivery. Medium size figures, between 20 and 30 cm, are the most common type and are called *nuchukana* ('little ones'), or, sometimes, *suarmala* ('wooden poles/sticks'). They are kept in wooden or plastic boxes at the feet of one of the two house posts. Their task is that of protecting Kuna households from incursions of evil entities (*ponikana*), demons (*niakana*) and ghosts (*kirmala*). Moreover, *nuchukana* are personal auxiliary spirits of Kuna ritual specialists, especially of the *nele*, the seer, and of the *apsoketi*, the knower of the healing chants. They are key in helping the former to diagnose illnesses and the latter to cure them. The third type of wooden statues is called *ukkurwalakana*. Those are taller figures, of around 1,5 m, carved out of balsa wood during collective healing rituals conducted by the *apsoketi* and the *nele*.



Figure 7 Kuna wooden figures

Ukkurwalakana are so called after balsa tree, *ukkurwala* (*Ochroma pyramidale*), from which wood they are made. They are carved during the preparation of the eight-day long ceremony, *nek apsoket*, carried out to rid the village from pathogenic animal spirits, who cause epidemics, or from the soul of a deceased person, which terrorizes people and affects the tranquillity of everyday

life. In Okopsukkun, a village in middle-Eastern San Blas where I conducted fieldwork, the most skilled carvers are asked to carve figures for the *nek apsoket*. Balsa figures are placed against the cane walls in the interior of the communal gathering house (*onmakket neka*). I have unfortunately never witnessed an actual ceremony of this kind. However, Kuna people described the rows of balsa figures of different size, lining against the walls in the dark interior of the gathering house, as a somewhat uncanny spectacle. I was told that they are ordered in a row from the tallest to the shortest, *como una escalera*, ‘like a stair’, a Spanish expression often used by Kuna people to refer to a set of siblings one near the other in age.

Powerful co-residents

Besides indicating the wooden figures, the term *nuchu* is also used to address children and youngsters in an affective way. A certain degree of affectivity and intimacy is also evinced in the way wooden figures are treated by household members. Although people seemingly pay no attention to their *nuchukana* during daytime (they would stand almost unnoticed at the feet of one of the two house poles), I noticed that members of the household are fully aware of their presence and interact with them during daily life.

Young, pre-pubescent girls regularly wash *nuchukana* with fresh water perfumed with sweet basil (*pisep*). This is meant to wash their cloths (*mola*). Elder women, normally the grandmother (*muu*), blow tobacco

smoke from a pipe on their *nuchukana*, and burn cacao seeds in clay braziers near them in order to nurture and strengthen them. Tobacco smoke is the unfermented maize drink (*inna*) of *nuchukana*, while cacao smoke is a medicine that strengthens their capacity to see (*kurkin okannoket*) and to interact with human and non-human beings. Adult men, and especially the oldest member of the household, the grandfather (*tata*), entertain personal relationships with *nuchukana*. A man who knows healing songs would rehearse them, lying in his hammock, before sleeping. These are long chants, incomprehensible to most people, which are sung in the language of *nuchukana*. For this reason, *nuchukana* are delighted to hearing elder Kuna people singing at night because, I was told, they like to converse (*apsoket*) with them. Many times village elders told me that it is important that young people keep learning healing songs because these songs make *nuchukana* feel alive and happy, thereby encouraging them to protect Kuna people against illnesses and misfortune. However, if men do not sing at night, women do not smoke, and young girls do not bathe them, *nuchukana* feel sad, weak and lonely, they do not feel loved, and may decide to abandon their human co-residents to move permanently to their village in the underworld, called Kaluypakki.



Figure 8 Leopoldo Smith carving a wooden figure

By the same token, *nuchukana* are acknowledged by household members as powerful ancient beings (*serretkana*) and are treated with deference and respect. I was intrigued each time I asked someone to show me their *nuchukana* under the sunlight by the care with which their boxes were moved and brought in the courtyard. People told me that if someone causes a *nuchu* to fall on the floor this might upset it. Even worse, if any one breaks specific restrictions during the performance of a healing ritual, *nuchukana* will retaliate against the performing singer and might even kill him. This is particularly serious during the *nek apsoket*,

during which adult men and elder women sit for many hours in the gathering house smoking pipes and cigarettes, while the *apsoketi* sings and the *nele* observes what happens in the invisible domains of the cosmos. All men have to abstain from sex, lest they would upset the *ukkurwalakana* participating in the ritual, who would kill the *apsoketi*.

Such apparently different feelings towards their ancient co-residents are also represented by the use of different terms to refer to them. On the one hand, the term *nuchu* ('little', 'young', 'small one'), used in current daily language, implies familiarity. On the other hand, when a singer addresses his *nuchukana* during curing sessions, he refers to them in general as *nelekana*, 'seers'. More specifically, he addresses each one with the mythic name of the owner of the tree species from which is has been carved. Kuna people agree in saying that the spirits inhabiting the wooden statues are powerful shamans. They move through the different layers (*pillikana*) of the cosmos, where animal entities and spirits live. When summoned by singers, they directly and personally confront evil spirits in order to retrieve abducted human souls. All these were once skills possessed by Kuna shamans, which have now disappeared. In brief, it seems that nowadays *nuchukana* embody the powers and skills once possessed by ancient Kuna shamans.

The past in the forest

People in Okopsukkun narrate stories about powerful shamans (*nelekana tummakana*) who lived in the past. These stories are divided between mythic and historical narratives. The former refer to eight powerful shamans who - corrupted by their own powers - brought tyranny and disruption among ancient Kuna people. The latter refer to the time when Kuna people lived in the Darién forest and mention figures of shamans who were also political chiefs. From a first analysis of Kuna ethno-history it emerges that Kuna people gradually abandoned forms of strong shamanism when they reached the Atlantic coast and then moved to the islands of the San Blas archipelago, around 100 years ago.

People in Okopsukkun told me that Kuna ancestors (*tatkana*) came from the river Tuile (Tuirá) near the border with Colombia. There, *tatkana*, male ancestors, were skilled hunters, powerful shamans and warriors, and *muukana*, female ancestors, were skilled hammock weavers, clay potters and experts in plant medicine. These forefathers used to live in kin-based groups in the Darién forest. Each group was semi-nomadic, settling near a river for only a relatively short period of time, before moving somewhere else. The reason for moving was the confrontation with other indigenous groups, such as the Emberá (cf. Wassén 1963) and the war against white people, *waymar* (cf. Salcedo Requejo 1908[1640]: 128-30). After a series of relocations, each group reached the Atlantic coast on a different spot. One of these groups arrived near the

mouth of the river Puturkanti, close to the island of Ustupu, where they moved at the beginning of 1900 and still reside.

When narrating the story of the arrival of the ancestors of Okopsukkun people on the coast, Reynaldo Tuny, one of my hosts and informants, mentioned the name of each river whereby they stopped. As Reynaldo explained to me, rivers in the Darién forest are named after the Kuna chief (*sayla*) who died in the settlement established there, or after the tree species which was more abundant on its banks. Trees and ancestors intermingle in the perception of the forest of people in Okopsukkun. The forest is a map of their history, where rivers are associated with historical events that fade into the mythic past. By the same token, I suggest that present day Kuna people think of ancient people's social life and relationships with different types of enemies (Emberá and Spaniards) in the form of the life of trees in the forest.

It is important to note that what is now a sociality based on condensed residential patterns with highly populated island villages (see Margiotti 2010), has been achieved, among other things, through the abandonment of strong forms of shamanism, especially those entailing violence. People in Okopsukkun told me that their ancestors were able to provoke lightning to fall on a person, to transform into jaguars and snakes, and to listen to distant conversions using different objects as mediators (cf. Chapin 1983: 141). These powers were used when people still lived in the forest and were constantly threatened by Europeans and other indigenous

groups. Today, acquiring the capacity to harm other people is highly disregarded. It is also said that people cannot achieve such powers any more. Moreover, while ancestors were fierce warriors, using bows and arrows and spears, contemporary Kuna people have a strong peaceful ethos, condemning any form of violence, both physical and shamanic (cf. Praet, this volume).

As I have suggested above, *nuchukana* embody shamanic skills once possessed by the ancestors of Kuna people who lived in the Darién forest. Moreover, as I argued elsewhere (Fortis 2008), wild emergent forest trees, growing deep inland, are considered by the Kuna as the visible manifestation of primordial beings. When Kuna elders talk about trees, they always refer to a mythic past during which fights between culture heroes and owners of animals took place. Present day trees represent the same source of power through which culture heroes overcame animal beings in the mythic past and established Kuna life as it is today.

Nuchukana seem not to be reducible to one single thing. Rather, they seem to embody multiple layers of meaning and history and evoke a distinctively complex ‘regime of historicity’, to borrow an expression used by Anne-Christine Taylor (2007). Myth and history merge in the Kuna practice of carving wooden ritual statues. Although the separation between mythic and historical pasts is maintained in Kuna discourses, it seems that an interesting problem comes to the surface when we try to understand what a *nuchu* is for Kuna people. Why are *nuchukana* associated to primordial immortal beings, even though they seem to have all the characteristics of

ancient Kuna people?

Let us turn briefly to another ethnographic example from the South American tropics that might provide helpful insight to address this problem.

Kwarip

In the myths of the people from the Upper Xingu in Central Brasil it is narrated, as Ellen Basso reports for the Kalapalo, that the creator Kwatingĩ, in order not to give his own daughters in marriage to the jaguar, decided to carve substitute daughters with the wood of a tree and send them to the jaguar's village. After many adventures, two of the 'made ones' (the wooden daughters) reached the house of the jaguar and married him. After some time the jaguar's mother had an argument with one of her daughters-in-law who was pregnant with the twins Sun and Moon and killed her (Basso 1987: 57-8). Born after their mother's death, the twins grew up thinking that their mother's sister was their mother. But one day they discovered the body of their real mother on the roof of the house. When they started crying for her she responded to them, but when they lowered her body they realized that it was half rotten and she eventually died. This mythic episode, which in its many variants is narrated throughout Lowland South America, addresses the crucial problem of death from the perspective of indigenous people. In the Kamaiurá version of the same myth, collected by the Villas Boas brothers, it is made clear that this episode represents the first 'socially acknowledged' death. 'Lowering the body [of their

mother] into the grave, they [the twins] said, “Now it will always be this way; people die and never come back. They will die only once” (Villas Boas and Villas Boas 1970: 64).

Xinguano people celebrate a ritual called *kwarip* by the Kamayurá, during which visitors from neighbouring villages are invited to participate. According to Pedro Agostinho’s ethnography (1974), the ritual is hosted by the kinspeople of a deceased person of high status and the ceremony is often held to commemorate more than one dead at the same time. During the ceremony sections of tree trunks, themselves called *kwarip*, are planted vertically in the centre of the village plaza and decorated with body paintings, feather headdresses and cotton strings. Each *kwarip* log stands for an individual dead. At the climax of the ceremony the kinspeople of each deceased person gather around the decorated log representing their dead relative and weep. The day after all the villagers come out of their houses and run to the centre of the village in a state of euphoria. At this point the *kwarip* logs are taken from their holes, carried outside the village and thrown in the nearby lake. This indicates the end of the ceremony.

The festive mood of Xinguano mortuary ceremonies is thus opposed to the sadness of the mythic explanation of the irreversibility of human death (Viveiros de Castro 1977: 120). The dead are celebrated through collective, inter-group ceremonies. After the ceremony they are expelled permanently from the village, so that the social life of the living can continue. *Kwarip* logs are the real core of the ceremony. They are

‘figures of person’, instantiating the original act of fabrication carried out by the demiurge Kwatingĩ, who carved his substitute daughters in wood (*ibid*: 122-3). By the same token, they represent the impossibility of replicating what they stand for: dead people. In the same way as the ‘made ones’ were different from Kwatingĩ’s ‘original daughters’, each *kwarip* log is different from the deceased person it represents. They concretely represent the impossibility of bringing the bodies of the dead back to life.

Interestingly, Xinguano dead are thought of as a category which stands in the middle between archetypal mythic beings and the living. The former are conceived as the prototypical model of actual living beings, the latter as imperfect replicas of the former. Therefore, in Xinguano philosophy the living and original mythic beings are separated by an incommensurable qualitative difference rather than by a chronological distance. The dead, as Viveiros de Castro puts it with respect to the Yawalapíti, live like the ancestors, although they are thought to be closer to mythic beings than the living (*ibid*: 111-9).

Conclusions

By bringing to a conclusion this brief exploration of some aspects of the Kuna and Xinguano relation to alterity and death I wish to make a couple of points. On the one hand, Lowland Central and South American people generally associate trees with primordial beings, immortality and ancestral people (cf. Basso 1987;

Chaumeil 2001; Erikson 2001; Virtanen this volume; Wassén 1933). On the other hand, the Kuna and people from Upper Xingu both use wooden logs as ‘figures of person’ to represent either primordial beings or the dead. My point is that through the comparison of these two cases, which I believe are not isolated in the lowlands of Central and South America, a particular aspect of the way the Kuna and the Xinguano think of the relationship between their lived worlds and their ontological preconditions emerges.

Kuna and Xinguano people use wooden ‘figures of person’ to mediate their relationship with the dead and primordial beings and therefore to securely recreate their lived world. By reproducing the original act of fabrication of human bodies using the wood of those trees which are themselves considered immortal beings, they concretely reflect upon the human condition. Looking at the mythology and ritual life of Xinguano people we can observe a double switch. Firstly, through carving substitute daughters out of wood the creator Kwatĩngĩ establishes a difference and a discontinuity between himself, a mythic being, and humanity. In contemporary Xinguano life this difference is projected onto the ontological level and is conceived of as an incommensurable gap that separates original mythic beings and the living. This is also translated to the difference that has to be ritually created between the living and the dead. This difference is instantiated during the *kwarip* ritual through the presence of the wooden logs representing the dead. Secondly, by means of indicating a ‘relation of figurative resemblance between

an image and its referent' (Chaumeil 2007: 261) – i.e. the *kwarip* log and the celebrated dead person - Xinguano people indicate by the same token a relation of ontological difference between the living and the dead (cf. Carneiro da Cunha 1978). This ontological difference is recreated constantly in the on-going construction of Xinguano social life.

Following this line of reasoning we can thus say that the living are clearly different from mythic beings and they are also different from the dead, while the relation between the dead and mythic beings constitutes a more blurred territory. It is perhaps by starting from these considerations that we should begin to look at the concept of ancestry among Amerindians, so often characterized by a sense of distance and alterity towards the past, its inhabitants and their remains in the present (cf. Gow; Montserrat Ventura; Praet; Virtanen this volume)

Kuna people today differentiate themselves from their ancestors who lived in the Darién forest and to their eyes represent a past of violence and shamanic bravery that is no longer acceptable in today's social life. Kuna people see their ancestors as Others and are aware that to be Kuna today means to be different from those Others. Therefore they have to avoid violence and forms of strong shamanism. *Nuchukana* remind the Kuna of their ancestors, while trees remind them of the primordial past. *Nuchukana* are therefore ancestral Others, insofar as they are the instantiation of ancestral forms of life which have become conflated with those of immortal original Others.

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